

Notes on the Death of Franco (Part I)

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Next issue: Part II of “Notes on the Death of Franco” will cover an analysis of modern Spain and the state of the revolutionary movement today. Murray Bookchin is the author of a forthcoming book *The Spanish Anarchists* which is on the press and will be published this year.

Death normally invites eulogy—even for a Mafia capo. Accordingly it is not surprising that the death of Francisco Franco summoned up the usual tribute from the acolytes of “relevancy”—a genre of people who are likely to praise any dictator from Stalin to Franco for “modernizing” their countries and ushering them into the “industrial age.” In the case of El Caudillo, Nixon happened to lead the pack. He praised Franco as “a loyal friend and ally of the United States...who brought Spain back to economic recovery and “unified a divided nation through a policy of firmness and fairness toward those who had fought against him.” At the other end of the spectrum, according to some press accounts, unmeasured numbers on both sides of the Spanish frontier opened their wine flasks and got drunk. I suspect that immense section of Spanish public opinion is reflected by those young Madrilenos who, when asked by American television interviewers why they filed past the coffin, bluntly declared that they wanted to see if the “old fascist” was really dead.

There is a comfortable conclusion toward which all sectors of-opinion are likely to converge, notably that Franco’s death “spells the end of an era.” That Franco may be the “last” of the “old fascists” whose personalities gave a face to the cold technocratic fascism of our own era has some truth, although Franco’s “personality” could accurately be dismissed as one shade of gray painted on another. In terms of his personality, the man was a deadening blank. The point seems to be that Franco provided a “face,” in contrast to present-day bureaucrats who are indistinguishable from the machines they operate. The regime could name avenidas after him and saddle his diminutive figure on marble horses in nearly every city in Spain. What could well rescue his reign from the opprobrium it deserves is forgetfulness, not forgiveness. A loss of a sense of history is perhaps the greatest support that could underpin the cult of “relevancy.” It is this forgetfulness, equaled only by the ignorance that has settled around the Spain of the thirties, that may well salvage the name of Franco and exalt his impact on Spanish society.

Franco and Mass Murder

Let me stress that if Francisco Franco was denied a place beside Hitler and Stalin as one of history’s most terrifying mass murderers, it was only because of the demographic limitations imposed upon him by the Iberian peninsula. Hitler had the hundreds of millions of Europe from which to collect his mountains of corpses; Stalin, the many tens of millions in Russia. Franco was limited to 24 million people. According to Gabriel Jackson, a liberal historian of the so-called “Spanish Civil War,” some 800,000 died out of those 24-million between 1936 and 1945. The figure may well have been as high as a million.

The “Red Terror” imputed by many historians particularly to the Spanish anarchists (for whom Jackson has neither sympathy nor understanding) is belied by Jackson himself in a brief but telling sentence. “In Catalonia and the Levant the anarchists arrested many a landlord and monarchist on the assumption that he had probably backed the uprising, but most of these people were released when the evidence, and the testimony of villagers who had known them for years, indicated they had nothing to do with the uprising.” By contrast with the admittedly



inflated figure of 20,000 executions which he places in the republican zone, Jackson observes that the “largest single category of deaths were the reprisals carried out by the Carlists, the Falangists, and the military themselves. Physical liquidation of the enemy behind the lines was a constant process throughout the war. The Nationalists had, by definition, far more enemies than the revolutionaries: all members of Popular Front parties, all Masons, all officeholders of UGT or CNT unions or of Casas del Pueblo, all members of mixed juries who had generally voted in favor of worker demands. The repression took place in three stages. At the outbreak of the war, the arrest and wholesale shootings corresponded to the revolutionary terror in the Popular Front zone; but there were a great many more victims because such arrests and shootings were officially sanctioned and because so large a percentage of the population were considered hostile. In the second stage, the Nationalist Army, conquering areas which had been held by the Popular Front, carried out heavy reprisals in revenge for those of the revolutionaries and in order to control a hostile populace with few troops...In the third stage, which lasted at least into the year 1943, the military authorities carried out mass court-martials followed by large-scale executions.” 1

If one adds 100,000 “battle casualties”—a loose phrase that often included the execution of prisoners—to the 20,000 executions in the republican zone, the Francoists may have systematically slaughtered close to 700,000 people and possibly as many as 880,000. Following Franco’s military victory in 1939, the slaughter began in earnest. It continued unrelentingly up to the early forties, when Franco, courting the Allies after Hitler’s retreats in Russia, began to reduce the executions. Possibly as many as 300,000 people were executed in this five-year period.

I know of no account of this carnage more compelling and dramatic than Elena de La Souchere’s “when time stood still” in her deeply perceptive work *An Explanation of Spain*. In Madrid alone, five permanent courts-martial tried prisoners in “batches” of 25 and 30. Accusations were merely perfunctory, based primarily on charges of membership in a leftist organization or participation in public office rather than supportable “atrocities.” The percentage of those...accused, rightly or wrongly, of ‘blood crimes’ was minute,” notes Souchere. Following an admonitory harangue by the military prosecutor, the defense was allowed a “brief collective plea.” Then the entire group was sentenced (usually to execution) without the military judges so much as leaving the hearing room.

Batch Executions

“A number of prisoners spent months and sometimes even years on death row and, two or three evenings a week, were submitted to the anguish of hearing their names on the roll call of men to be executed the next morning. In Madrid during the first two years of the regime, there were at least three hundred men in every ‘batch.’ The condemned spent their last night in the prison chapel, standing, kneeling, or seated on the stone floor. At dawn, their hands were tied behind their backs and the lower parts of their faces were bound with rubber muzzles so that during their last trip, their chants and huzzahs! for the republic would not incite people to riot. Then they were hustled into trucks and taken to the cemetery where, in the chill fog of early morning, soldiers with sleep-heavy eyes waited and held their machine guns ready. In single file the condemned walked across a sort of gangplank, its wood already battered by previous machine gun fire. When the gunners had again polished off their task, officers with heavy revolvers leaped here and there over the every-which-way bodies, to deal the coup de grace to those still breathing.” 2

This is the story of the “face” of Francisco Franco, the story we are requested to forget, to bury with Franco’s own corpse in the “Valley of the Fallen.” In my view it takes a conventional Marxist as well as a Fascist to exculpate horrors of this kind in the “higher name of history.” One may reasonably ask how many millions were slaughtered in much the same fashion by the Russian Bolsheviks, the Chinese Maoists, the soft-spoken Ho, and the volatile Castro. Nor can we exculpate the liberals, figures like Thiers who, as early as 1871, provided a strategic model for Franco by withdrawing from Paris when his position proved to be untenable and returning with a conquering army not to achieve victory but to enact a bloody “final solution” to the century-long unrest of the Parisian sans-culottes. Franco followed an identical policy. Having failed to capture the major cities of Spain in July, 1936, he shifted the thrust of his rebellion from a typical military pronunciamiento to outright military conquest. The social movements that had played so creative a role in Spanish history for nearly 70 years were to be utterly uprooted and destroyed. This was no ideological or institutional act; its goal was outright extermination of every militant, even every focus of unrest.

The Franco Smash

Forgetfulness also threatens to conceal the fact that the “Spanish Civil War” was above all a sweeping social revolution—in Burnett Bolloten’s words, a revolution “more profound in some respects than the Bolshevik Revolution in its early stages” and, I would be inclined to add, in any of its stages. It was primarily an anarchist revolution, whether guided by massive anarcho-syndicalist organizations such as the CNT-FAI or the result of 70 years of anarchist agitation. Franco smashed this movement. Whether it had the resilience to return in anything resembling its original form after the blood-letting it suffered would now be idle speculation in view of the changed social conditions in Spain.

Inextricably bound to Franco’s victory, however, was the aid he acquired from the Spanish Communist Party. It is impossible to write the biography of Franco, to give an account of his “National Movement,” or to explain his success without stressing the counterrevolutionary role of Stalin and the Communists in Spain. From the murder of Andres Nin—in a secret Stalinist prison to the Communist execution teams who shot wounded anarchist militiamen during the Battle of the Ebro, the history of the Communists has been marked by such a ruthless commitment to counterrevolution that it bears comparison only with Ebert and Noske in Germany. The comparison was made in the most cutting fashion by Camillo Berneri, one of the most widely respected Italian anarchists of his day, shortly before he too was killed by Stalinist agents in May, 1937, in Barcelona.

In time some of us came to realize that the Communist Party’s activities formed perhaps the most Spanish fascism. To place the party on the “left” had marked our deference more to symbolism, rhetoric, and tradition than to political reality. What now boggles my mind is how little this harsh fact is understood today within and, far less excusably, outside of Spain. The emergence of a neo-Stalinism so widespread that it can enrapture contributors to WIN as well as the hacks who write for the Guardian is evidence of a “forgetfulness” much closer to stupidity than to a lack of memory. As if the verdict of Spain were not enough, a recent verdict from Portugal might seem to suffice for years to come. “The Communists have let us down again,” bitterly declared a leftist journalist in Lisbon after the recent military uprising, “as they let the rest of the left down in Chile after the coup.”³ It is time to recognize that this is neither “treachery” nor “betrayal” but the consequences of a totally misplaced belief in the revolutionary nature of authoritarian “socialism” as such. The Communist Party in every country of the world is no more on the “left” than Franco’s Falange; it can no more be “red-baited” than the followers of George Wallace or Ronald Reagan.

To speak frankly, however, I strongly fear that this verdict will not suffice. It is understandable that the Spanish people, who have been denied access to their own history, will see in the well-financed and well-organized Spanish Communist Party a lever for social change. But it is utterly unforgivable that American and European radical intellectuals, particularly those who profess a non-authoritarian approach; so readily surrender their moral probity with each change in the political winds as to reinforce the illusion that the Communist parties are socially redeemable.⁴ Here the cult of the “relevant” and the “contemporary” betrays itself as the lack of an organic insight in which the background of events is seen as much a part of the future as the present.

Franco’s victory in 1939 did not form the prelude to the Second World War as the historians tell us. It marked the definitive end of the classical working class revolutions which began in 1848 with the June insurrection of the Parisian proletariat. Step by step, each major European country exhausted this heritage, a heritage from which traditional anarchism and socialism derived their hopes and their theoretical equipment. In France, all the later fireworks notwithstanding, the heritage ended with the fall of the Commune in 1871. Thereafter, the French proletariat never seriously challenged the established order as a class, however theatrical its participation in the events of the thirties and the sixties. Indeed, as a class its activity was siphoned into institutionalized parties and unions, organizations to which it has been obedient for more than a century. Eventually, it was not Thiers and his executioners who were to bring the revolutionary heritage of the French working class to an end, but the advent of modern large-scale industry and the powerful discipline it exercised upon the workers themselves.

In Germany, this era was almost certainly over by 1920, revealing itself in the assimilation of the Social Democratic and Communist parties to the capitalist system. In Russia, the era ended with the crushing of the Kronstadt sailors in 1921. America, the center of large-scale industry and mass production-par excellence, never even rose to the level of a labor party, much less an insurrectionary proletariat.

Militancy and violence should never be confused with revolutionary behavior and revolutionary action. The American class struggle has been militant enough, but rarely has it evolved to the level in which sizable numbers

of workers were to challenge the social order itself. Indeed; never has it risen to the level of consciousness where self-activity could yield the promise of self-management which we associate with a libertarian socialist society.

Spain alone carried the classical tradition well into our own century. Here, every classical working class' movement, indeed almost every revolutionary sect, played out its programmatic role with guns in hand. Each exhibited its possibilities and limitations within the traditional framework that had been created by the 1840s. With the collapse of the Spanish revolution a full history of proletarian socialism—whether syndicalist or Marxist, libertarian or authoritarian—came to an end.

see also:

Los Quijotes: Anarchist Youth Group, Spain, 1937

and

News of the Spanish Revolution: Anti-authoritarian Perspectives on the Events

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